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Movies: Dark Side Rising

By Richard Corliss

Toward the end of *Revenge of the Sith*, the malefic Darth Sidious advances on Yoda, most of whose comrades on the Jedi Council have been cruelly cut down as the Republic is betrayed and the evil Empire spreads its vulture wings. "At last," the Sith lord hisses, sensing victory over a foe, "the Jedi are no more." Yoda, with all the knowledge and power of the Force compacted into a two-foot fur ball, squints sternly and issues one of his upside-down oracular sentences: "Not if anything I have to say about it."

The Star Wars saga could have ended 22 years ago, when Return of the Jedi concluded the trilogy of space-fantasy films that revolutionized mass entertainment, from the making and marketing of movies to the design of toys and video games. George Lucas' exhausting eight-year adventure--one that no studio had wanted to finance--turned into an improbable triumph. Star Wars (1977), The Empire Strikes Back (1980) and Jedi (1983) earned \$1.3 billion worldwide, back when that was real money. Lucas became one of the richest men in movies, the bright lord of his own destiny. Now he could direct those artsy little films he kept saying he wanted to make.

One problem, one long, tantalizing loose thread. In Lucas' eyes, the Star Wars odyssey was wrapped up only at one end. He had shown how Luke Skywalker marshals a band of rebels "to destroy the Sith," as the prophecy had it, "and bring balance to the Force." Still, in the filmmaker's mind was another, more complex tale: how ambition can twin with obsession and twist toward the dark side--how Luke's father Anakin devolved into the deadly Darth Vader. Lucas' brain teemed with plots and characters, exotic creatures, worlds to be spun out of the words and sketches in his notebooks. Also, by numbering the extant episodes IV, V and VI, he was implicitly promising a prequel trilogy to the millions of Star Wars fandroids.

"So I said, 'Well, I'll do the last three because if I don't, I'll probably regret it,'" he recalled recently, sitting in his office at Skywalker Ranch, the 6,500-acre Marin County, Calif., production facility that his Star Wars largesse bought him. "And then I got a lot of people saying I was going about it the wrong way." But Lucas' gift, maybe his burden, is an artistic stubborn streak--a determination to follow his own voice and style. Change the course he had set? Not if anything he had to say about it. And, really, he had the only say. "I said, 'I want to tell this particular story in this particular way, and we'll just get there.'"

On May 19, you'll see where they got: back, finally, to the beginning. The narrative arcs of the grand epic, gracefully bending in a double helix, will be complete. Anakin (Hayden Christensen), the handsome, headstrong young Jedi, will be lured by impulses both arrogant and poignant to collide with his awful fate. Under Darth Sidious, the Sith Empire will shred and swallow up the fragile Republic. Anakin's Jedi guru, Obi-Wan Kenobi (Ewan McGregor), will scuttle into hiding, as will Yoda. Over the galaxy, the silence of repression will fall, broken only by the cries of two infants, Luke and his twin sister Leia. "This is the movie that people have wanted to see," says Christensen, who in Sith steps confidently into Anakin's turbulent and agonized manhood. "And it does it in a clever enough way that you're never a step ahead of the story."

Clever, indeed. After two episodes--The Phantom Menace (1999) and Attack of the Clones (2002)--that often dawdled in political filibustering and starchy line readings, after the fan base's outrage at the unfortunate Jar Jar Binks incident, Revenge of the Sith shows Lucas storming back as a prime confector of popular art. Again one feels the sure narrative footing of the first Star Wars, the sepulchral allure of Empire, the confident resolution of a dozen plotlines that made Jedi a satisfying caper to the original enterprise. True, Lucas can pack little surprise into a backstory that's obliged to complete the saga's circle in the middle. But there's an origami elegance to his folding of the old (new) story into the new (old) one. Sith will surely start a stampede to resee the 1977 film as a reminder of how the 13-hr. tale proceeds. Lucas is nothing if not an expert extender of his franchise.

Sith has some clunky bits--all the films have those--and some amateur acting. But McGregor grows and grays intelligently into the middle-aged Obi-Wan, and his fellow Scot Ian McDiarmid has a starmaking turn as Chancellor Palpatine. It is brooding stuff, the most violent of the series--it's rated PG-13--about the coming-of-age of a classic villain. Anakin even has a bit of Shakespearean resonance: the conflicted Hamlet finding the grasping pride of Macbeth, the noble assassin Brutus festering into a yellow-eyed Titus Andronicus.

Sith begins in agitation with the opening crawl's exclamation "War!" and a zesty, muscle-flexing skirmish between a quartet of Federation droid attack planes and the Jedi fighters of Anakin and Obi-Wan. "This is where the fun begins," Anakin says. The lad is a hotshot aerial ace, a proto--Han Solo, with the ego and adrenaline that are the marks of a superb warrior and will breed a hubris that Darth Sidious can exploit.

The two Jedi find Palpatine manacled in the lair of the Sith lord, Count Dooku (Christopher Lee), an ally of General Grievous, the dog-faced, metal-skeletoned, prune-gutted--and computerized--droid leader. In the ensuing lightsaber battles, Anakin gains strength and focus from his anger and, instead of arresting his foe, executes him. "It's not the Jedi way," the lad says remorsefully afterward. But that taste of righteous fury will prove addictive.

After more escapes and escapades, the Jedi pair bring the Chancellor back to Coruscant, capital of the Republic, where Anakin is reunited with his love--and secret wife--Senator Padmé Amidala (Natalie Portman). She is pregnant, a condition that, if known, would mean Anakin's expulsion from the Jedi priesthood. Much more troubling is a dream he has in which, as he tells Padmé, "You die in childbirth." "And the baby?" she asks. "I don't know," he replies. [Readers who don't want to know the identity of Darth Sidious are free to skip the next two paragraphs.]

To Yoda, Anakin reveals his unease, though not its cause. "The fear of loss is a path to the dark side," the tiny savant observes. "Train yourself to let go of everything you fear to lose." Translation: Loved ones die; get over it. That is counsel Anakin can't accept. He needs a different guru, so he turns, fatefully, to Palpatine, who has poison to pour into the young man's ear. To Anakin, it feels like honey, sounds like sagacity--because it is just what he wants to hear. The truth is that he can recite the Jedi catechism but can't feel it. He knows "the Sith rely on their passion for their strength. They think inward, only about themselves." Yet that is why Anakin is a natural Sith--and why he would make an ideal apprentice to Palpatine and the Chancellor's alter ego, Darth Sidious.

In the subtly insinuating performance by McDiarmid (here playing, 22 years after Jedi, a character some 20 years younger), Palpatine is a creature of dulcet tones and the darkest treachery. The sadness of his smile suggests wisdom gained at a heavy price. His soothing voice sells a seductive line of reasoning: that the Jedi are spurred by power lust and limited by their code. Thus he sets about achieving what the actor describes as "the coldhearted seduction and corruption of young Anakin." Palpatine is never more persuasive than when his life is at the mercy of the powerful young Jedi. By appealing to Anakin's need and greed, he turns the lad into Darth Vader and secures his own "unlimited power!" [Potential spoilers end here.]

In the movie world, unlimited power is what Lucas has. But when he decided a decade ago to expand upon both the story and the visual effects necessary to give it life, Lucas set

himself two daunting challenges: to please an audience made picky by all the fantasies that followed his and to match or exceed the recent innovations in an industry he effectively created with the Star Wars films and the effects company, Industrial Light & Magic (ILM), he built to realize his fantastic galactic visions.

It was ILM's work with Steven Spielberg on Jurassic Park (1993), that convinced Lucas that more complex worlds could be put on film. "Jurassic Park showed that you could create things using a computer that were so realistic, you could insert them into a movie seamlessly," Lucas says. "It offered infinite manipulation of the image, as opposed to before, when you photographed something and were kind of stuck with that image. And it's infinitely cheaper."

In Phantom and Clones, as in the digital DVD updates of the first trilogy, Lucas paraded glamorous landscapes and a bestiary of chimerical critters--all to demonstrate his techies' abilities to make the surreal real and sometimes at the expense of the drama. Sith, with 90 minutes of animation (in contrast with 60 in Phantom and 70 in Clones), is less ostentatiously revolutionary than its predecessors. Rather, it's a consolidation of earlier breakthroughs. The climactic face-off between Sidious and Yoda is a potent, visually plausible merging of a human actor and a digital one. When an audience takes for granted the integration of live action and animation, the revolution Lucas pioneered can be said to have triumphed. If he has his way, soon all movie theaters will be junking film projectors and going digital.

Techies love working for Lucas because his movies introduced them as kids to the wonders of effects work; he was their Obi-Wan. He's savvy enough about the mechanics that he knows what's possible and so trusting in his staff that they will try to visualize the impossible for him, like the giant lizard Obi-Wan rides or the lava in Mustafar, where Anakin and Obi-Wan do battle. Lucas can mix all those elements in the editing room after the live-action scenes have been shot. "In postproduction," says visual-effects supervisor Roger Guyett, "he is creating the movie in his imagination, using visual effects."

Ben Burtt, who has designed the sound effects for every Star Wars film, says of Lucas, "He's always been more comfortable working in a private creative space than a public one. In the editing room, you have the time to try new things, and if they fail, nobody knows. That's how the creative issues are worked out. On a movie set, there are a lot of people and a lot of pressure, and you're paying a lot of money for every moment."

There are also actors, who may feel stranded as they stand before a green screen and try simulating eye contact with a monster that hasn't yet been created. "There's more imagination required than for regular movie roles," says Portman, "because it's not just imagining what's going on inside you. You're also imagining the environment you are in. A lot of times, you are working with a tape-marked X and imagining a blue sheet as a universe." Christensen adds, with a smile, "I wish they taught classes in green-screen acting." As for the veteran McDiarmid, he shrugs off the green-screen ordeal. "Movies are strange things with their own mad rules," he says. "You're always in a corner of a room, and the rest of the room is filled with lots of people."

In two weeks, lots of people will fill movie houses around the world to judge the latest and last Star Wars episode. True believers will debate and deliberate over each scene with the

severity of a Jedi Council. The rest of us will breathe a sigh of relief that Lucas found the skill to make a grave and vigorous popular entertainment, a picture that regains and sustains the filmic Force he dreamed up a long time ago, in a movie industry that seems far, far away. Because he, irrevocably, changed it.

--Reported by Desa Philadelphia/Skywalker Ranch